

THEME OF RESISTANCE IN THE SELECTED POEMS OF AMIRI BARAKA

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present paper is to trace the theme of resistance to racism in the selected poems of Amiri Baraka. The paper analyses how Baraka in his poetry looks for ways of subverting the dominant white supremacist cultural logic. Resistance in Baraka's works, especially poetry, is to hegemonic representation, ideology and values which tend to discriminate against and oppress the individuals on the basis of race. Through his poems, Baraka draws attention to the prevalent inequality, injustice and oppression of black people in the United States. As a fervent critic of the dominant Eurocentric white cultural and political institutions, he advocates a complete, even violent, cultural separation from the white society. The purpose of the present paper is to point out the various strategies of resistance employed by Baraka in his struggle against racist structures in art and society.

KEYWORDS: Resistance, Discrimination, Domination, Oppression, Cultural Identity

INTRODUCTION

Amiri Baraka, previously known as Le Roi Jones, the main exponent of the 1960s Black Arts Movement has been one of the most acclaimed, militant voices in America. A prolific writer of poetry, plays and essays, he has vastly influenced the shaping of African American aesthetic. Joyce Pettis in her book rightly acclaims Baraka's work as "institution building, at bridging the gap between the arts and the people, and at using the arts as catalysts to awaken black cultural pride" (Pettis 2002:21). Baraka's work thus has been acclaimed for laying down of new strategies of resistance to racism in America whereby art came to be closely connected with the issues concerning the black community. The paper examines a few of his celebrated poems for the theme of resistance to racial domination and discrimination. This paper analyses how Baraka in his poetry looks for ways of subverting the dominant ideologies of the white world which marginalize black identity.

Stephan Duncombe *Cultural Resistance Reader* aptly describes cultural resistance as "that is used, consciously or unconsciously, effectively or not, to resist and/or change the dominant political, economic and/or social structure". Hence, as Duncombe goes on to elaborate, "Cultural resistance can provide a sort of free space for developing ideas and practices. Freed from the limits and constraints of the dominant culture, you can experiment with new ways of seeing and being and develop tools and resources for resistance. And as culture is usually something shared it becomes a focal point around which to build a community" (Duncombe 2002:5-6). Baraka's writings are an apt example of this yearning to create a free space for the black community to fill with positive images of African American identity.

The history of African Americans has been one of struggle against exploitation, discrimination and marginalisation. African Americans were brought to America against their will and forced to work as slaves for their white

masters. The only way they could express the trauma of separation and yearning for the home land and also keep their culture alive was through their songs and music. Through the oral tradition they could connect with each other even as it took them a long time to give shape to what came to be termed as African American literature. The emergence of black aesthetics thus has always been to provide ways for the community to deal with racist discrimination, marginalisation and exploitation. Though Baraka along with other proponents of 1960s' Black Arts Movement is credited with leading protest against stereotypical conceptions of black identity, the seeds of resistance against racism were sown much earlier. In 1840s, Henry Highland Garnet, while speaking at one of the antebellum black summits, proclaimed "No oppressed people have ever secured their liberty without resistance," and thundered in emotionally charged words,

"Brethren, arise, arise! Strike for your lives and liberties! Now is the day and the hour,
let every slave throughout the land do this, and the days of slavery are numbered.
You cannot be more oppressed than you have been-you can not suffer greater cruelties
than you have already. Rather die freeman than live to be slaves. Remember you are four
millions!... let your motto be Resistance! Resistance! Resistance" (Aptheker, 1951:232).

While the words aptly conveyed deeply felt anguish and trauma, the black community however was far from adopting a militant stance against their mistreatment and marginalization in the American society. Mostly the feeling was that of forever being in a dilemma, experiencing what W.E.B. DuBois in the 1920s so succinctly termed as the "double consciousness... a looking at self through the eyes of the other" (Du Bois 2000:3). DuBois further explained, "one ever feels his twoness,-- an American, a negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings: two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder." (3) The overall message thus was directed at the white, pleading with them for their acceptance even as the black community also was advised to work towards being worthy of that.

Thus as Kimberly Benston rightly observes, "Two basic cultural theories have offered radically different solutions to the "two-ness" of black American life. One, pro-integrationist or "assimilationist" school of thought, which accepted that the American-ness of the black man is incontrovertible... On the other hand, there is the anti-integrationist or "nationalist" viewpoint, which maintains that assimilation means merely the suicide of decolorization, an eradication of cultural identity through the adoption of white manners and values" (Benston 1976:31). Both these views have run simultaneously in African American literature. Baraka in the late 1960s of course, chose to advocate the militant angry school of resistance and revolution. As a prolific writer of poems and plays, he went about the task of achieving the purpose, which Baraka had succinctly announced in his 1966 collection, *Home- Social Essays*, "The Black Artist's role in America is to aid in the destruction of America as he knows it. His role is to report and reflect precisely the nature of the society, and of himself in that society, that other men will be moved by the exactness of his rendering and, if they are black men, grow strong through his moving, having their own strength, and weakness; and if they are white men, tremble curse, and go mad, because they will be drenched with the filth of their evil" (Baraka 1966:251). Thus under the banner of 1960s Black Arts Movement, began an era of revolution and resistance in literature with Baraka becoming its most vocal presence.

Amiri Baraka with his angry, militant poems and plays became the iconic figure of resistance and representation of black identity. Baraka himself acknowledged his participation in the Black Arts Movement as 'true move to Home and

light' (Baraka 1971:112) With the assassination of Malcolm X on Feb 21, 1965, an angry Baraka turned out to take revenge against the white's treatment of blacks. Baraka stressed upon the need to produce poems that could be used as a weapon against white cops, a symbol of white's power and control in the American society. No more did he want to find his place in the white America, rather he desired the world itself to turn black. He was more in agreement with what Addison Gayle later on said was the basis of the black aesthetic, "The question for the black critic today is not how beautiful is a melody, a play, a poem, or a novel, but how much more beautiful has the poem, melody, play, or novel made the life of a single black man"? (Gayle 1971: xxiii). Thus art became the tool for bringing about positive changes in the life of black people. In 1965 Baraka took the decision to talk exclusively to black people through his poetry, for him, whites were not worth attacking. "Black Art" the last subsection of *Black Magic Poetry* conveys the political implications of Baraka's poetry. Experimental in form and marked by the strong advocacy of black separatism; Baraka's poems indicated his transformation as a revolutionary poet. In his poem "Black Art", Baraka proclaims

Poems are bullshit unless they are
teeth or trees or lemons piled
on a step.
Again, he declares:
We want 'poems that kill.'
Assassin poems, Poems that shoot
guns. Poems that wrestle cops into alleys
with tongues pulled out and sent to Ireland.....
We want a Black poem. And a
Black World
Let the world be a Black poem
And Let All Black People Speak This Poem
Silently
Or LOUD. (Baraka 1995:219- 220)

The poem proved to be a landmark work as it put into words the political manifesto of Black Arts Movement. Pettis in her book rightly applauds the poem as a "representative of the models of the Black Aesthetic poetry that challenged passivity and aimed to energize a black nation" (Pettis 2002:23) The main purpose of Baraka's poetry thus became to achieve communal unity so that the ongoing collective campaign for rights could be strengthened. Baraka in the poem wants to develop consciousness among blacks to stand together in their struggle and to move forward in a unified manner. He goes on to the extent of treating words as weapons as guns and knives in the revolutionary struggle. For Baraka poems are not merely literary but material means to become an active participant in the revolution. Kimberly Benston clearly points out that through this poem Baraka "... gives the black world a new meaning- transforming it by alienating it from the enveloping culture and the crude, harsh, antipoetic reality which characterizes the mainstream. Doing

so, he intensifies his sense of himself as strong, autonomous, and creative – Together/Collected/Black (Benston 1976:40). Baraka thus had set the path for other black writers to walk on with the same common aim. The call was to write black poems that would have revolutionary power to reverse the dynamics of power in the American society. Baraka merges life with poetry and uses concrete images to destroy an unjust world.

He strongly believed that art and politics could not be separated. For Baraka this kind of commingling of art with politics gave black literature its unique identity. In 1968 Karenga while appreciating Baraka's poem declared in his essay "*Black Art: A Rhythmic Reality of Revolution*", "All art must reflect and support the Black Revolution, and any art that does not discuss and contribute to the revolution is invalid... Black art must expose the enemy, praise the people, and support the revolution. It must be like LeRoi Jones' poems that are assassin's poems, poems that kill and shoot guns" (Karenga 1968:31-32). Baraka's poetry thus had set the revolutionary tone and tenor of black literature.

In his poem "SOS" Baraka gives a call to black people to come together to fight for their rights. He says:

Calling black people

Calling all black people, man woman child

Where ever you are, calling you, urgent, come in

Black people, come in, wherever you are, urgent, calling

You, calling all black people (Baraka 1995:218)

Amidst the ongoing black political and social struggle for civil rights, the poem came to be used to call black people to join in the nationalist struggle. The poem was widely read at several public events. Baraka in this poem wishes to establish a social climate that would promote confrontation with white power structure. This poem was also a call to the black writers to stop hiding their talent and produce revolutionary works. He emphasises that black people must own their world and no longer remain at the margins of society. For a people long used to marginalisation and powerlessness, the idea of coming together was to assume a sense of power, respect and self.

"Attention, Attention" is another poem in which Baraka appeals to the black community for their full participation in the mission of resistance against white's domination and racism.

Attention Attention

Attention Attention

All greys must be terminated immediately

Project cut off date moved up Fifty Years

End of species must be assured.

End of species must be assured (Baraka 1969:135)

In the poem Baraka hints at the death and destruction of all whites. He draws the attention of the blacks to take revenge of the loss which the whites have given to them. Baraka employs inflammatory and obscene language in his poetry to raise the inner consciousness of blacks. For him violence is the only viable means to black rebirth.

“Ka’Ba” is another revolutionary poem in which Baraka expresses his anger against whites when he says:

A closed window looks down

On a dirty courtyard, and black people

Call across or scream across or walk across

defying physics in the stream of their will (Baraka 1995:221-222)

The call now was for a collective action against their exploitation. Baraka through his words inspires and encourages his fellow black people to raise their voices and get justice. His words aim to awaken community to their history when he says,

We have been captured,

Brothers. And we labor

To make our gateway, into

the ancient image, into a new

correspondence with ourselves

and our black family. We need magic

now we need the spells, to raise up

return, destroy, and create. What will be

the sacred words? (222)

Baraka here reminds the black community of their cultural heritage as also of past suffering and humiliation at the hands of whites. But now the time has come to take revenge which can be achieved only by destroying the white supremacist cultural logic. This can only be done through their unity drawing power from one another. The poem sums up the action they need to take, destroying the slave selves thrust upon them by an unjust social system to reconnect with their real selves and then finding their new identity as proud black people. Their songs, Baraka reminds them have the power as the sacred words to achieve all. Here Baraka also attempts to re-narrate the black history. In this narrative, slavery becomes merely one aspect whereas Baraka traces links with the African past, “the ancient image.” The aim is to project continuity of an ancient respected and noble culture even as, Baraka acknowledges that black people must throw off the slave selves thrust upon them by the whites.

Baraka insists that blacks must take pride in their cultural past, traditions and values. They must throw off the western mask and adopt the African traditions. In his poems Baraka thus advocates the complete extinction of white culture in order to create a new black world. His is a strong political message for the community to liberate themselves from the influences of white culture and assume a separate unique black identity. In the poem Baraka goes on to celebrate the African culture and traditions. He says:

We are beautiful people

With African imaginations

Full of masks and dances and swelling chants

With African eyes, and noses, and arms (222)

The poem thus expresses a yearning to assume an honourable sense of past instead of the one that talks merely of slavery. Having rejected white values, Baraka thus endeavoured to create art that reflected true values of African American life. Art as such could no longer be merely for art sake, it had to connect with the black community.

“We own the night” is another short and beautiful poem that highlights the implications of being black and encourages the community to be proud of that. The poet says:

We are unfair And unfair We are black magicians Black arts we make in black labs of the heart

The fair are fair And deathly white

The day will not save them And we own the night (Baraka1991: 170)

The poet proudly celebrates his blackness while denigrating the white for being lifeless, pale shadows. On the other hand blackness is welcomed as symbolising strength. It is like the night with hidden powers that makes them powerful magicians. The white people who always boast of their having a fair complexion are shallow and hollow figures. The poet thus advises black to be proud of their blackness.

Baraka’s “A Poem for Black Hearts” eulogizes Malcolm X, A militant leader of the Civil Rights movement, Malcolm X was assassinated in 1965. He was one of those who inspired the black community to assume power through the mantle of resistance against the white Eurocentric culture. Malcolm X played a pivotal role in Baraka’s undertaking of resistance against white’s racism through violence. In this poetic eulogy Baraka says:

For Malcolm's pleas for your dignity, black men, for your life, black man, for the filling of your minds with righteousness, For all of him dead and gone and vanished from us,

Again, he says

let nothing in us rest until we avenge ourselves for his death, stupid animals

that killed him, let us never breathe a pure breath if we fail, and white men call us faggots till the end of the earth.(Baraka 1995:218)

The poem, written in free verse, in twenty seven lines not only immortalizes Malcolm X but also encourages blacks to take part in the struggle for rights and self respect. The main purpose of the poem was to raise awareness and self consciousness among blacks to ensure success of the struggle for rights. Every part of the Malcolm’s body is given significance so that the image of the leader becomes an inspiration for all black men. Malcolm X through his speeches evoked a sense of pride in black people. He did not bow down to any white power structure, instead, remained steadfast in his aim. Thus in the poem Baraka inspires blacks to follow the path of the great leader and emphasizes the urgency for resistance. The aim is to create a free space for themselves in order to present their ideas and values.

“Black people”, acclaimed as the most revolutionary poem by Baraka was a call to arms, a call to turn everything upside down.

You know how to get it, you can get it, no money down, no money never,

money don't grow on trees no way, only whitey's got it, and makes it with a machine,
to control you. You can't steal nothin from a white man,
he's already stole it he owes you anything you want, even his life.(Baraka 1995: 224)

This poem interprets Baraka's vision of future. The poem was written during Newark rebellion. Baraka and two others were arrested by Newark police for violence and the poem was used against him at the trial. Judge Leon W. Kapp, even added the statement that Baraka's writings were misdirecting the black people. The poet asserts that blacks should indulge in violence by robbing or even killing whites in order to get justice. The whites have taken away everything from them. He says, "[The white man] owes you anything you want...All the stores will open if you say the magic words. The magic words are: Up against the wall mother fucker this is a stick up! ...Let's get together and kill him my man" (224). The poem was a successful attempt by Baraka to bring to light the chaos, destruction and murders and killing of blacks during the rebellion. These incidents, he felt, were sufficient reason for the community to take to violence against the whites.

In his poem "It's Nation Time" the poet lays emphasis upon togetherness. The title 'It's Nation Time' came from the daily refrain used by Black Nationalist political speakers in late 1960s. "They would often exhort the crowd to fever pitch with the chant "What time is it?" and the crowd would roar, "It's nation time" (Watts 2001:235).

Time to get
Together
Time to be one strong Black energy space
One pulsating positive magnetism, rising
Time to get up and
be
Come
be
Come, time to
be come
it's nation time.(Baraka 1995:240)

This poem is an embodiment of the revolutionary nationalist ideas, manifesting the significance of ideology and fundamental nature of their revolutionary struggle. The poem became the rallying cry of various conferences and meetings and asserted the massive spirit of unity. Here also Baraka urges African Americans to stand together and participate in the struggle for rights and respect. In the poem the poet emphasises on unity of blacks. In one rally, speaking as the director of the Black Arts, Baraka pleaded for unity, "if you want a new world, Brothers and Sisters, if you want a world where you can all be beautiful human beings, we must throw down our differences and come together as black people". Poetry for Baraka thus was not merely an artistic expression, rather to voice often a major political issue. He through his poems tried to erase the borders between arts and politics. Baraka stressed upon violence in his poetry to end inhuman treatment of blacks. He defended social violence as necessary to get social respect and recognition.

CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, Amiri Baraka through his poems offers resistance as counter discursive practice against the dominant, discriminatory oppressive representation of identity. His poetry reveals the resistance offered against racist projections of identity representing authentic images of black identity. Baraka in his poems employs several strategies of resistance to decentre dominant western rhetoric that tries to naturalise inequalities and injustices in both local and global contexts. Baraka on the other hand drawing excessively from the theories of other black ideologues such as W.E.B DuBois, and Malcolm X etc, aimed at changing the thinking of the entire black community. Baraka with his poetry moves much forward from Du Bois' definition of "double consciousness." Baraka instead shows a way out of the dilemma by single – mindedly assuming an Afrocentric identity. He is constantly in confrontation with the surrounding Eurocentric white culture. Baraka abandons the integrationist poetics of earlier writers whose main purpose was at bringing black literature with in the American mainstream. Baraka's celebration of blackness is all the time based upon a violent rejection and devaluing of the white culture. Through his poetry Baraka urges blacks to acquire political strength and resort to mob violence. In his opinion, the situation of the blacks would not change unless the community took direct action. Thus in order to end their segregation and discrimination, black had to resort to violence. For Baraka freedom is not given but rather won.

His poems are not meant for white readers and white audiences, their purpose was to directly address the black community and inspire them to come together. Baraka's poetry like his theatre thus, "actively contested the prevailing value systems and dominant ideologies of the western world, calling attention to the politics of representation- both of blacks and by blacks"(Bhangu 2010:71) His main motive was helping black people out of the hold of stereotyped notions of identity. Baraka in his poems lays emphasis upon the idea of collective unity of blacks to fight against injustice. Resistance in Baraka's poems thus strives to create the free spaces which they could fill up with the vibrant images of self. Written in an easily understandable but violent language, his poems endeavoured to mould the black consciousness and open new and boundless prospects for future writers. By the end of the decade, other black poets dazzled by the revolutionary poetry of Baraka, began to venture deep into the Afrocentric to portray images of a resurgent black culture.

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